



Summary of Meeting with Conrad deFiebre

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle, Bloomington, MN 55437

Friday, May 23, 2008

Guest speaker: Conrad deFiebre, fellow, Minnesota 2020

Present: Verne Johnson, chair; Charles Clay, Paul Gilje, Jim Hetland (by phone), and Wayne Popham (by phone)

A. Context of the meeting —Continuing its effort to receive information on transportation policy from a broad range of viewpoints, the Civic Caucus today is visiting with Conrad deFiebre, fellow, Minnesota 2020, who issued a transportation report in January 2008 with recommendations to the Legislature. The report is available at:

http://www.mn2020.org/index.asp?Type=B_BASIC&SEC=%7B94CB2076-8BB7-4D57-8055-596FA4B2CA4C%7D&DE=

B. Welcome and introductions —Verne and Paul welcomed and introduced **Conrad deFiebre**, fellow, Minnesota 2020. Minnesota 2020 is a progressive think tank founded in 2007 by former legislator Matt Entenza. Minnesota 2020 focuses on jobs and economic development, education, health care and transportation. Before joining Minnesota 2020, deFiebre worked 34 years as an editor and reporter at the *Star Tribune*, the last 11-plus years covering Minnesota politics and government from the State Capitol. He also was a copy editor, night sports editor, southern Minnesota correspondent, and St. Paul bureau reporter. He earned a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Journalism from the University of St. Thomas and a Master of Science Degree from the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism.

C. Comments and discussion —During deFiebre's comments and in discussion with the Civic Caucus the following points were raised:

1. The benefits of more investment in transportation —deFiebre contends that evidence is overwhelming that investing more dollars in transportation, via gasoline tax increases and other means, results in significant benefits to the economy. Thus, he is puzzled why finding dollars for transportation can be so controversial. A shortage of funds causes roads and vehicles that use them to deteriorate.

2. Rail transit is important — deFiebre said rail transit is very much a part of the economic development picture. Civic Caucus members discussed with deFiebre whether rail transit encourages compact development or urban sprawl. One can imagine a cluster of housing, retail and office in the vicinity of a transit station, which has been characterized as a desirable development to encourage. But long distance rail can make it more appealing for people to live long distances from employment, which contributes to urban sprawl.

Continuing the discussion of economic development, a Civic Caucus member said there's no question that rail transit will have an impact on economic development. The real question, the member said, is whether accomplishing economic development is the main reason for rail transit improvements.

3. Capturing increase in land value —The Center for Transportation Studies at the University of Minnesota was charged by the 2008 Legislature to study whether increase in land value in the vicinity of highway interchanges and transit stations might offer a potential revenue source to finance transportation improvements, deFiebre said. He has written a supportive article on that issue. See http://www.mn2020.org/index.asp?Type=B_BASIC&SEC=%7BAD5C288C-EECD-48CC-9B04-3F4539AC04B5%7D&DE=

4. Central corridor not designed as "rapid" transit —Referring to critics of the planned central corridor light rail line between downtown Minneapolis and downtown St. Paul, deFiebre said the central corridor LRT is not being designed to provide speedy commuter service, such as the planned Cedar Avenue and 35W rapid busways. The central corridor LRT is designed to serve a host of different kinds of travel all along the route.

5. Degree of emphasis on serving the downtowns —A Civic Caucus member wondered why more attention isn't being given to providing transit options for the vast majority of work trips (85 percent) in the metro area that are destined for locations other than the two downtowns. It is particularly noteworthy, the member said, when you notice that the freeway lanes that terminate in the downtowns seem less crowded than the freeway lanes that serve destinations outside the downtowns.

6. Legislature providing more money for roads than transit —deFiebre said many people have the incorrect assumption that the \$6.6 billion transportation bill approved by the 2008 Legislature was chiefly for transit. Only 16 percent of that appropriation goes for transit, he said. The rest is for roads.

A Civic Caucus member wondered whether a roads-versus-transit distinction is helpful. The metropolitan area has a network of roads (slow, moderate, and high speed) that serve all property and over which all types of vehicles can travel. Transit vehicles, cars, and trucks use this network. There's not one network for transit vehicles and another network for other vehicles. Thus, the member observed, it is difficult to understand why it is so important to overlay the existing network with a separate right-of-way network of rail, where vehicles are fixed to the rail and don't have the flexibility to use roads.

deFiebre pointed out that the Central Corridor LRT will use existing right-of-way, although others noted that, in effect, the LRT will remove part of the roadway and create a separate LRT right-of-way.

A member observed that such an approach might have the effect of creating more congestion on the roadway (Washington Avenue and University Avenue). deFiebre said Metro Council projections show that future transit demand in the Central Corridor cannot be satisfied without adding LRT.

deFiebre said he is planning to write an article on the history of streetcars. He said he suspects that subsidies for roads and bridges drove streetcars out of business.

7. Questions about the structure of transportation decision-making in the metro area —While deFiebre hasn't paid too much attention to whether a new metro counties organization is needed for rail transit (as authorized by the 2008 Legislature), he said it seems clear that a political disagreement between the Republican Governor and the Democrat-controlled Legislature led to the new structure. The new county structure is providing the funds for rail transit that could not be found in other ways. Also, he said, the new structure should work if leaders of the Metropolitan Council and the counties organization can get along.

A Civic Caucus member said that questions of assigning responsibility for LRT operating deficits could magnify differences between the Metropolitan Council and the counties. Moreover, the member noted, counties are administrative units of the state, not just units of local government, such as cities.

8. Questions about the structure of transportation decision-making at the state level —Quality of leadership in MnDOT and a lack of money are the main reasons for problems at the state level, deFiebre said. He's not sure structural changes are needed. A Civic Caucus member said that an issue at the state level might be whether the Governor, with MnDOT's assistance, is providing a sufficiently comprehensive strategic plan, covering transit and highways.

9. Possible way to organize structural questions in transportation —A Civic Caucus member said the discussion indicates that several areas where structural issues might be addressed:

—relationship between the Metropolitan Council and the counties

—relationship between the Metropolitan Council and the state (in light of new legislation giving the Council operating responsibility for rail, within and outside the seven-county area)

—role of MnDOT in highways and rail. Currently, MnDOT has a much stronger leadership role in highways than in rail.

—role of the Governor in an overall state strategy for transportation

deFiebre observed that given the size of the transportation issue, and the number of participants, it is difficult to prepare an overall plan.

10. Substantial need for additional funds —Action by the 2008 Legislature was the best news for transportation funding in 20 years, deFiebre said, but even with new dollars provided in 2008, transportation needs are far from being fulfilled. MnDOT, for example needs \$2.4 billion per year through 2014, he said, but new legislation will provide only about \$400 million of that need.

The Minnesota 2020 organization had recommended a gas tax increase of at least 10 cents a gallon, indexed for inflation. The biggest mistake the Legislature made this year, he said, was failing to index

the approved increase (8.5 cents over several years) to inflation. The state has condemned itself to an ever-shrinking source of funds, relative to the increase in expenses, he said.

The group briefly discussed whether the state's general sales tax should be extended to cover gasoline.

11. Support for congestion pricing —deFiebre said he supports imposing charges on motorists as a way of combating congestion, such as fees planned for 35W south of downtown Minneapolis.

12. Concern over distribution of public affairs information —As a veteran ex-employee of the *Star Tribune*, deFiebre called the last 50 years of the 20th century the "golden age" of newspapers. Most were monopolies in their circulation region and could largely charge what they wanted for advertising. Moreover, they also had control of classified advertising, a major revenue-producer. Thus they could afford to hire enough quality staff for their news rooms. All that has changed with the internet, he said. He doesn't see any way for the trend to be reversed. He's not yet sure about the future of new on-line news outlets.

13. Thanks —On behalf of the Civic Caucus, Verne thanked deFiebre for meeting with us today.